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GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN PERCEIVED SUPERVISORY SUPPORT

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Psychology

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

Ashraf Rayani

August 2015

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN PERCEIVED SUPERVISORY SUPPORT

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August 2015

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ABSTRACT

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN PERCEIVED SUPERVISORY SUPPORT

by Ashraf Rayani

As Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y interact with each other in the workplace, popular media and HR practitioners have suggested ideas on how to promote these groups to work cohesively under one organizational umbrella. Beyond encouraging the partnership of these three generations, it is also important for organizations to understand how these three generational cohorts differ in the level of support they receive from their supervisors. Therefore, the current study bridged that research gap by investigating differences in perceived supervisory support across the three generational cohorts. An online employee engagement survey was administered to 935 business professionals from the healthcare industry in California. Results showed that Gen Xers were similar to both Baby Boomers and Gen Yers in their level of perceived supervisory support, but Baby Boomers perceived somewhat higher levels of supervisory support than Gen Yers. These results suggest that Baby Boomers feel slightly more valued for their contributions by their supervisors than Gen Yers. The results of this study suggest that managers should be mindful of the support they provide to their employees across the generations and communicate with their team members more effectively. Additionally, it is suggested that managers provide training and developmental opportunities for Gen Yers to increase perceived supervisory support levels.

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Introduction

For the first time, there are three major generations interacting with each other in the workforce bridging more than 40 years in age (Eisner, 2005). Now that many Baby Boomers are close to retiring, there is a new generation in the workforce gaining attention in both popular media and academic research – Generation (Gen) Y, also known as Millennials. Popular media suggest that Millennials are much different from previous generations in terms of their workplace behaviors, attitudes, values, and management preferences. However, a lack of cross-generational scientific research to validate such popular media claims has resulted in decisions made by human resources practitioners that are based merely on intuition (Cogin, 2012; Howe, Strauss & Matson, 2000; Lewis, 2003). Furthermore, assessing the levels of supervisory support a generational cohort receives has not been explored. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to bridge that research gap by investigating potential differences in perceived supervisory support across the three active generational groups in the workplace: Baby Boomers, Gen X and Gen Y.

This paper begins by describing the three generations, identifying generational differences in behaviors, attitudes, values, and management preferences, and defining perceived supervisory support. Though we describe all active generations, Gen Y is of particular interest when finding differences in perceived supervisory support as this group is the newest member of the current workforce. Members of the three cohorts are referred to as Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Gen Yers.

Generational Categories

A generation, often referred to as a cohort, consists of people of similar age in a similar location who experience similar social, historical, and life events (Becton, Walker & Jones-Farmer, 2014). Such shared experiences differentiate one generation from another because these events have a profound effect on the attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors of the generational groups (Smola & Sutton, 2002). This is not to suggest that each individual within a generation is not unique; rather, it is to suggest that each generation develops a collective personality that impacts its members. Making generalizations about the individuals in each generational cohort is merely a way to identify common experiences and perceptions (Smola & Sutton, 2002).

Baby Boomers. Members of the Baby Boomer cohort were born between 1946 and 1964 (Becton et al., 2014; Eisner, 2005). Though Baby Boomers are currently the largest generational cohort in the workforce, many of them are approaching retirement, which will then place Gen Xers in more senior roles and place Millennials in line manager and entry level roles, respectively. Boomers grew up with events such as the Vietnam War, Watergate scandal, Woodstock, the civil rights movement, the Kennedy and King assassinations, and the sexual revolution – all events contributing to a time of dramatic social change. Due to such events, many of these individuals have qualities of being independent (i.e., a belief that they have full control of their own destinies), respecting authority, displaying high resiliency, and being hardworking (Meriac, Woehr & Banister, 2010). Additionally, they are generally very optimistic and confident when

communicating with other individuals. Because Baby Boomers grew up in a time of social reform, they often value free expression and believe that they have the ability to make an impact in the world (Espinoza, Ukleja & Rusch, 2010).

Compared to prior generations, Baby Boomers had more access to educational and financial opportunities, which enabled them to be achievement oriented, loyal to organizations, diligent, and career focused (Becton, Walker & Jones-Farmer, 2014). Though members of this cohort have a tendency to seek consensus and dislike authoritarianism, they tend to micromanage others in the workplace (Francis-Smith, 2004). This go-getter attitude shapes them to believe in working long hours to achieve growth, change and expansion (Eisner, 2005). Baby Boomers often do not plan to retire, they want to continue developing themselves to remain competitive in the job market (Johns, 2003). Baby Boomers are viewed as social butterflies; it has been suggested that due to their lack of technological skills, networking with peers works to their advantage (Johns, 2003).

Generation X. Gen X consists of individuals born between the years 1965 and 1981 (Espinoza, Ukleja & Rusch, 2010). This generation is influenced by events such as economic uncertainty, recessions, high unemployment rate, inflation, downsizing, and high divorce rates among their parents. Gen Xers witness tough economic times in the 1980s and saw their parents get laid off. In addition, they were also exposed to females pursuing higher educational degrees and excelling in jobs previously reserved for men.

As a consequence of their unique childhood experiences, Gen Xers grew to be individualistic, distrustful of corporations, and lacking in loyalty, with an increased desire to be financially self-reliant, and entrepreneurial risk-takers (de Meuse, Bergmann & Lester, 2001; Tulgan, 1995). In an effort to maintain work-life balance, Gen Xers are found to be self-oriented. They are outcome focused and seek specific and constructive feedback (Allen, 2004; Francis-Smith, 2004). Additionally, they expect advancement sooner than older generations, but they are less likely to view work as an important part of their lives (Smola & Sutton, 2002). Growing up, Gen Xers became accustomed to the idea of their parents being away for work for the majority of the day. Their unwillingness to communicate with others makes it difficult for them to network and collaborate with others on team projects (Johns, 2003).

Generation Y. Gen Y, also called Millennials, Nexters (Howe, Strauss & Matson, 2000), and Net Generation (Tapscott, 1988), is comprised of those born between the years 1982 and 2000. This cohort consists of 73 to 75 million people, which is similar in size to Boomers (78 million) and expansively larger than Gen X (50 million) (Lipkin & Perrymore, 2009). Within the next decade, Millennials are on track to account for more than half of the U.S. workforce (Pew Research Center, 2010).

Gen Yers grew up with both parents working full-time to bring home money to raise their families. However, unlike Gen Xers, Gen Yers had access to infrastructures such as childcare, preschool and after-school programs. As a result, Gen Yers practiced highly structured lives with days packed with extracurricular activities. As individuals,

Gen Yers show characteristics of being family oriented, being open-minded to diversity, and believing in authenticity (Raines, 2010). In fact, parents of Gen Yers were more heavily involved in their children's lives than parents of previous generations. Some practitioners tend to label them as "helicopter parents" as they hover over their children in hopes of being involved in every decision (Francis-Smith, 2004). Though this cohort is used to playing an active role in family decision making, they are still inclined to be courteous and respectful of parents and grandparents (Francis-Smith, 2004).

One may conclude that this generation has it easy because they are technologically savvy, but the globalization of society is thought to have had a tremendous impact on their lives. In fact, Gen Y is said to be the first high-tech cohort as they cannot recall life before cell phones, personal computers and ATMs, suggesting that this generational group relies heavily on their resources for day-to-day events (Becton, Walker & Jones-Farmer, 2014). Additionally, Gen Yers have seen more violence at an earlier age compared to their predecessors, including events such as Columbine and 9/11, thanks to 24-hour media which covers every incident that happens in every corner of the planet (Sujansky, 2004). Exposure to such events has impacted Gen Yers by instilling a strong sense of morality, patriotic behavior, and the willingness to fight for freedom (Allen, 2004).

Even with the help of their parents, this generation worked throughout high school to obtain discretionary income. Technically literate and educated, this generation is continually wired, plugged in, and connected to digitally streaming information,

entertainment, and contacts. With characteristics such as the ability to multi-task and being socially conscious with high emotional intelligence, they have slowly become the most demanding generation to have entered the workforce (Lewis, 2003). Though they are demanding, they crave intellectual challenge and stimulation via meaningful work which makes them more attached to their work than their organizations (Becton, Walker & Jones-Farmer, 2014). Similar to Baby Boomers, Gen Yers displays a strong desire to succeed (Eisner, 2005).

Generational Differences in the Workplace

As mentioned previously, each cohort develops characteristics that distinguish it from previous generations. Consequently, it is important to identify generational differences in the workplace in regards to such things as behaviors, attitudes, values, and preferred management traits. Over the years, a handful of empirical evidence has accumulated that suggests there are generational differences in these characteristics. For the sake of this study, it is important to compare differences to Gen Y as they are currently the largest competing generation in the workforce (Becton, Walker & Jones-Farmer, 2014).

Differences in workplace behaviors. Because generations have varied life history patterns, researchers have taken the stance that generational groups also differ in workplace behaviors. For instance, parents of Gen Y encouraged participation in the decision making process at home. Due to this practice, research has found that this generation expects such involvement in the workplace, as well (Francis-Smith, 2004).

Becton, Walker, and Jones-Farmer (2014) collected a sample of 8,040 applicants from two organizations to investigate if Baby Boomers would display fewer job mobility behaviors and more instances of compliance-related behaviors in comparison to Gen Xers and Gen Yers. Though the authors did not find statistically significant differences between the generations regarding these work behaviors, they believe their results have important implications for management practices based on additional ad-hoc analyses. In regards to job mobility behaviors, this study found Baby Boomers to be more loyal and attached to an organization than Gen Xers and Gen Yers because the members believe in lifetime employment. Additionally, Becton et al. (2014) found that Gen Xers and Gen Yers showed signs of leaving their current jobs when better opportunities arose, or to look for other opportunities when their current employers were not meeting their standards. Though both Gen Xers and Gen Yers do not seem to value loyalty to an organization, Eisner (2005) found that Gen Xers were likely to focus on keeping their skills current to improve their job security, whereas Gen Yers were less likely to view job security as an important factor in their careers.

Keeping in mind the notion that Gen Xers and Gen Yers may be less loyal to their employers, these tendencies may result in greater disregard for work values, policies and procedures (Becton et al, 2014). Gen Yers have shown their need to belong by displaying greater entitled, narcissistic, and assertive behaviors in the workplace compared to previous generations (Becton, Walker & Jones-Farmer, 2014). Due to this entitlement, these individuals are also more open than previous generations to the concept of leaving their current positions for something better regardless of their tenure (Saad,

2003). With that said, it is important to note that Gen Yers feel no more workplace stress than the previous generations, and are just as satisfied as the others with retirement and health benefits (Saad, 2003).

Differences in workplace attitudes. Generally defined, workplace attitudes consists of evaluative (cognitive) and emotional (affective) reactions to various aspects of work. Kowske, Rasch, and Wiley (2010) sought to find generational differences in workplace attitudes such as job security, satisfaction with pay and benefits, recognition, and career development by sampling 115,044 U.S. employees using Kenexa WorkTrends employee opinion survey. They found that generational differences in workplace attitudes do exist, in that Millennials displayed more satisfaction with job security than earlier generations, as well as, greater satisfaction with their opportunity to get a better job and develop their career at their current organization. Additionally, the results showed that Millennials wanted and craved more recognition than Baby Boomers and Gen Xers.

Past research has not only shown affective differences, but also cognitive differences in workplace attitudes between generations. For instance, Baby Boomers are notorious for abhorring laziness (Eisner, 2005), and Gen Xers are known to bring to the workplace practical approaches to problem solving (Smith & Clurman, 1997). On the other hand, Gen Yers grew up in a school system that catered to their self-esteem, which resulted in them feeling confident, opinionated, and socially active with the belief that they could make a difference (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008). Southard and Lewis (2004)

conducted research to find similarities in generations, such as sense of independence and goal orientation. The study found that although Baby Boomers and Gen Xers believed in long-term investments of time and effort to build their careers, Millennials gravitated towards opportunities with instant gratification. This generation wants to find the next Google, and they want to find it now.

Differences in workplace values. Workplace values – personal beliefs about what is right or wrong – are vital to understanding how individuals act and interact with others in the workplace. Expanding on this phenomenon, Rokeach (1973) claims that values remain relatively stable over time, unlike attitudes and behaviors that are subject to change.

Cogin (2012) conducted a longitudinal study to identify generational differences in work values by administering 1000 questionnaires to Australian, American, Chinese, Singaporean, and German employees at a large multinational company. The study, in fact, did find significant generational differences with a few similarities between groups. Baby Boomers valued hard work most and independence least. Gen Xers most valued asceticism, but least valued independence. Lastly, Gen Yers most valued asceticism, but least valued anti-leisure. Keeping these findings in mind, it was suggested that in order to increase congruence with Gen Yers, it would be best to include variable work schedules and extended leave for study or travel. On the other hand, for those who are soon to retire (Baby Boomers), organizations should consider reconfiguring work arrangements to arrange for a gradual exit.

Differences in preferred management traits. Each cohort has a unique set of behaviors, attitudes, and values that ultimately impact their preferences in management traits (Zemke, Raines & Filipczak, 2000). Differences in management traits set the stage to identify what each generation expects from their leaders or managers, which will ultimately make them more motivated employees. Meredith, Schewe and Hiam (2002) suggested that an individualist approach that values self-expression should be adopted for Baby Boomers, an excitement style for Gen Xers that makes them feel like they are changing the world, and a team based approach that is close to Millennials' values of accomplishing their societal and career goals.

In order to gather information on differences in management preferences among generations, Arsenault (2004) surveyed 203 Baby Boomers, 243 Xers and 154 Millennials at a northeastern university. A MANOVA was conducted to determine the effect of generation on the ratings of 10 desired leadership characteristics: honesty, loyalty, competence, caring, determination, ambitious, inspiration, forward-looking, self-confident, and imagination.

In terms of the top five desired leadership characteristics, for all three generations, "honesty" was ranked the highest. In the second position, "competence" was highly regarded by Baby Boomers and Gen Xers, but, on the other hand, Millennials were more interested in "determined" leaders. Both Baby Boomers and Millennials valued "loyalty," but Gen Xers was more attracted to "determination". In the fourth position, Baby Boomers ranked someone who was "caring", Gen Xers wanted someone who was

“loyal,” and Millennials wanted someone who was “competent”. Lastly, both Gen Xers and Millennials were looking for “ambitious” leaders, however Baby Boomers were seeking someone with “determination”. Though in different rankings, “honesty,” “competence,” “loyalty,” and “determination” were all common top five characteristics among the three generations.

Aresenault (2004) suggested that because Baby Boomers had a higher preference for caring, competent and honest leaders, they would desire leaders who are compassionate and spirited. Additionally, Gen Xers and Millennials would want leaders who dare to challenge the system and the status quo. Overall, the generational differences in rankings of admired leadership traits build on the idea that each generation has its unique set of behaviors, attitudes, and values. Murphy, Gordon, and Anderson (2004) state that “if managers do not understand these value similarities and differences, they could be setting themselves up for failure or loss of valuable employees by not knowing how to motivate employees” (p. 20).

In identifying behaviors, attitudes, values, and valued management traits for Baby Boomers, Gen Xers and Gen Yers, it is clear that besides a few similarities, Millennials are different from their predecessors. For example, loyalty to an organization is not as important to Gen Xers or Gen Yers as it is to Baby Boomers. On a more unique note, Gen Yers value recognition and asceticism more than their previous counterparts and they are most inspired by a determined leader in their organization.

Though researchers have identified what these generations value and expect of leadership, they have failed to highlight the importance of supervisory support. It is important to note that past research has suggested that employees do not leave organizations, but rather their managers (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Eisenberger & Rhoades, 2002). Keeping in mind Millennials' high turnover rate (Pew Research Center, 2010), it is expected that poor manager-direct report support encourages this more than other factors. Supervisory support fills this gap in research by distinguishing which generations feel valued and supported versus those that do not. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine generational differences in perceived supervisory support.

Perceived Supervisory Support

The current research investigates perceived supervisory support (PSS) as a function of generational differences. PSS refers to employees "develop[ing] general views concerning the degree to which supervisors value their contributions and care about their well-being" (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski & Rhoades, 2002, p.565). PSS stems from a larger theory of organizational support theory (Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli & Lynch, 1997; Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison & Sowa, 1986), which states that employees meet their socio-emotional needs by developing beliefs regarding the extent to which their employer values their contribution and genuinely cares about their well-being. This belief can either be swayed toward a positive or negative orientation, which ultimately contributes to the employee's recognition and welfare.

The idea of PSS, originally proposed by Kottke and Sharafinski (1988), was derived from the concept of perceived organizational support (POS). POS refers to employees' general beliefs that their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being. More specifically, employees personify the organization and take its favorable or unfavorable treatment as an indication that the organization favors or disfavors them as an individual (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). PSS stemmed from the idea that just as employees form perceptions concerning their value within an organization, they also develop views concerning the degree to which their supervisors value their contributions and care about their well-being. In essence, supervisors act as agents of the organization who have responsibility for evaluating their subordinates' performance, providing social support, career guidance, and mentoring (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006). If the employee receives favorable treatment from a supervisor, that should ultimately contribute to POS (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Levinson, 1965). The strength of this relationship, of course, depends on the degree to which employees connect with their supervisor, as opposed to viewing the supervisor's actions as idiosyncratic (Eisenberger et al., 2002).

In order to quantify the PSS construct, Eisenberger et al. (1986) developed a 36-item survey to measure perceived organization support called the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (SPOS). Shore and Tetrick (1991) evaluated the construct validity of the SPOS with a confirmatory factor analysis leading to the conclusion that the SPOS is a unidimensional scale. Due to the unidimensionality of the scale, Eisenberger et al (1986) reduced the SPOS to two shorter versions: a 16-item and an 8-item survey.

Kottke and Sharafinski (1998) started a trend, which Eisenberger et al. (2002) later adapted, to replace the word “organization” with the term “supervisor” in the SPOS to measure PSS.

Research surrounding PSS has primarily used the construct as a predictor. Similar to POS, research has found that PSS is positively related to employee outcomes such as in-role performance, extra-role performance, affective commitment, work effort, organizational citizenship behavior, and unit performance, and negatively related to turnover intention (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006).

Though there has been a lack of research with PSS as a criterion, research has, in fact, used POS as a dependent variable. In a meta-analytic study, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) found that antecedents to POS are fairness (procedural justice, interactional justice, and perceived organizational politics) and organizational rewards and job conditions.

Fairness, as an antecedent to POS, refers to the extent to which management maintains open channels of communication and explains the motivation for well-meaning actions. It consists of procedural justice, interactional justice, and perceived organizational politics. Procedural justice is defined as the fairness regarding the policies or procedures used to determine the allocation of resources among employees, whereas interactional justice involves the quality of interpersonal treatment to employees when communicating outcomes. Additionally, perceived organizational politics refers to the

organization's attempt to influence others in ways that promote self-interest, often at the expense of rewarding individual merit or furthering interest of the organization.

In their meta-analysis, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) found that the three kinds of fairness collectively had the strongest relationship with POS with procedural justice ($r = .54$) and interactional justice ($r = .50$) being positively related to POS, and perceived organizational politics ($r = -.82$) being negatively related to POS in comparison to the other antecedents. These strong relationships regarding justice perceptions suggest that employees feel more supported by organizations when they have procedural and interactional justice and less supported when there are organizational politics. It can be inferred that employees value the opportunity to have their opinions heard and, additionally, prefer being treated with respect in the administration of policy because they feel cared for by the organization.

Organizational rewards and job conditions refers to human resource practices (recognition, pay, promotions, job security, autonomy, role stressors, training, and organization size) that recognize employee contributions. Organizational rewards and job conditions can be evaluated by factors such as the amount of job-related resources an employee receives, rewards for high performance, developmental opportunities, and autonomy for individuals and workgroups. In their meta-analysis, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) found that organizational rewards ($r = .46$), job security ($r = .37$), and autonomy ($r = .37$) were positively related to POS; whereas, role stressors ($r = -.30$) was negatively related to POS. These relationships suggest that employees feel valued by

their organization when they are given proper pay, promotions, job security, and autonomy, but do not feel supported when they are faced with role-stressors.

In their meta-analysis, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) also included demographic variables such as age, education, gender, and tenure as antecedents for POS. In regards to this study, the demographic characteristics showed very little relationship with POS (age ($r = .09$), education ($r = .05$), gender ($r = -.07$), and tenure ($r = .02$)). According to the results, out of the four demographic variables, age had the strongest relationship with POS. Perhaps the reason why age did not display a stronger relationship is because it was measured by individual age units rather than cohorts (Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Gen Yers).

According to organizational support theory, there is a positive relationship between PSS and POS which can be interpreted as PSS leads to POS (Eisenberger et al., 2002). Due to the nature of the relationship between POS and PSS and age and generational cohorts, the current study proposed that generational cohorts would be related to PSS.

Present Study

As generational diversity increases among today's workforce, a common feat is to recognize these differences among the three cohorts. There are sufficient data comparing the three generations on behaviors, attitudes, values, and management preferences, but there is little research that focuses just on the new generation that is catching everyone's

attention, Gen Y. The purpose of this study was to solidify speculations about generational differences in supervisory support by examining how the current largest generation in the workforce, Gen Y, perceives supervisory support.

To test the claims that generations differ in perceived supervisory support, and more specifically focused on Gen Yers, the following research question will be tested.

Research Question: Are there differences in perceived supervisory support between Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y employees?

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 935 business professionals from the healthcare industry in the state of California. Data were collected during multiple annual employee engagement surveys in 2010. Employees were to participate in this survey on a volunteer basis. However, a minimum qualification to participate in the survey was that employees had to have worked for the company for at least 90 days at the time of data collection.

Demographic data were obtained from the company's Human Resources Management System (HRMS) records. The overall participant pool consisted of 33% Baby Boomers (45+ years old), 36.4% Gen X members (30-44 years old), and 30.6% Gen Y members (18-29 years old) (see Table 1). According to the U.S Census Bureau report of 2013, Baby Boomers would make up of 31% of the population, Gen X would consist of 31% and Millennials would make up 38% of the U.S. population in 2015 (Fry, 2015). The current sample is similar to the Census Bureau projections.

The sample included 682 female participants who comprised 72.9% of the sample, and 253 male participants who made up 27.1% of the sample. More specifically, the Baby Boomer cohort consisted of 217 females and 92 males. The Gen X cohort consisted of 247 females and 93 males. Lastly, the Gen Y group consisted of 218 females and 68 males.

The total sample consisted of White ($n = 452$, 48.3%), Black or African American ($n = 277$, 29.6%), Hispanic or Latino ($n = 147$, 15.7%), Asian ($n = 34$, 3.6%), American Indian/Alaskan Native ($n = 7$, .7%), and Pacific Islander ($n = 3$, .3%). Specific to this sample, Gen Xers had almost 20% more Black or African Americans than Baby Boomers or Gen Yers with 40.9%. The Hispanic or Latino population gradually grew from 3.9% of the Baby Boomers population to 14.1% of Gen Xers and 30.4% of Gen Yers. On the other hand, Whites went down significantly from the Baby Boomers generation (69.9%) to Gen Xers (37.4%) and then staying somewhat stagnant through Gen Yers (38.1%).

In order to qualify to participate, employees had to be tenured at the organization for at least 90 days. With that said, the total sample reflected that 182 (19.5%) employees were with the company for less than 1 year, 287 (30.7%) fell between 1 to 3 years, 138 (14.8%) between 3 to 5 years, and 328 (35.1%) more than 5 years.

Table 1

Demographic Profiles of the Three Generations (N = 935)

Variable	<u>Baby Boomer</u>		<u>Generation X</u>		<u>Generation Y</u>	
	<i>n</i> = 309	%	<i>n</i> = 340	%	<i>n</i> = 286	%
Gender						
Female	217	70.2%	247	72.6%	218	76.2%
Male	92	29.8%	93	27.4%	68	23.8%
Race/Ethnicity						
American Indian/Alaskan Native	3	1.0%	3	.9%	1	.3%
Asian	11	3.6%	15	4.4%	8	2.8%
Black or African American	63	20.4%	139	40.9%	75	26.2%
Hispanic or Latino	12	3.9%	48	14.1%	87	30.4%
Pacific Islander	1	.3%	2	.6%	0	.0%
Not Specified/Prefer not to state	2	.6%	3	.9%	1	.3%
Two or more races	1	.3%	3	.9%	5	1.7%
White	216	69.9%	127	37.4%	109	38.1%
Tenure						
Less than 1 year	32	10.4%	56	16.5%	94	32.9%
1 to 3 years	64	20.7%	104	30.6%	119	41.6%
3 to 5 years	52	16.8%	48	14.1%	38	13.3%
More than 5 years	161	52.1%	132	38.8%	35	12.2%

Measures

This study was a part of a larger survey which asked questions about the effectiveness, as well as importance of, employee alignment, organizational systems and practices, supervisory support, and an overall employee engagement index to employees of the respective organizations. The survey was developed to gather employees' opinions regarding the effectiveness of the organization in the areas of organizational support, supervisory support, alignment strategies, and their level of engagement at work which consisted of a total of 23 items (Ware, 1999, 2012). The scale items were developed based on a literature review and had demonstrated good validity and reliability in the previous 22 years of research conducted by a consulting company in Mountain View, California. For the purpose of this study, we will be focusing on the construct of supervisory support within this engagement survey.

Perceived supervisory support. Supervisory support was defined as the perceived behaviors of managers such as providing support and encouraging creativity in the workplace. This construct was measured by seven items. Perceived supervisory support was measured by items such as, "My manager helps me get the resources I need to meet my goals," and "My manager solicits my input when making decisions that affect me." The scale items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*). Responses to these items were averaged to create a supervisory support score. Higher scores among employees indicate higher levels of the perception that they feel supported by their managers. Cronbach's α was .90, indicating high

internal consistency of the scale.

Background/Demographic Items. Four background/demographic items were collected through the company's HRMS to obtain a description of the sample as well as allow for potential future analyses. These specific items include ethnicity, gender, generational group membership, and tenure.

Procedure

Participants were provided with a link to an online employee engagement survey and a unique password to their company email address. No identifying information was collected from the participants (beyond the aforementioned demographic items) and data were gathered confidentially to ensure that every participant remained anonymous. Employees had an option not to participate in the survey; if they chose to participate, they used a password given to them to log into the survey website. The survey took approximately 15 – 20 minutes to complete and had to be completed on-site during business hours in one sitting.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations of the measured supervisory support variables. Participants perceived that their manager provided adequate resources ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.13$), discusses decisions that affected them ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.33$), recognizes when they did good work ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.28$), places extra emphasis on individually catered recognition ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.26$), is aware of their career goals ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.27$), provides autonomy ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.17$) and provides feedback to improve performance ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.22$). The correlations among supervisory support items were all moderate and positive.

Test of Research Question

In order to address the research question of whether there are generational differences in perceived supervisory support, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with perceived supervisor support (PSS) as the dependent variable and the three generations (Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y) as the independent variable. Results are shown in Table 3 and Figure 1. The analysis approached significance, $F(2, 927) = 2.85$, $p = .059$, implying that the three generational groups seem to be different on PSS and perhaps further analysis would provide more insight to the relationships. Due to the proximity to significance, conservative ad-hoc analyses (Tukey-b comparisons) were conducted in order to determine whether any of the three generations differed from each

other. These comparisons revealed that Gen Xers ($M = 3.59$) were not significantly different from either Baby Boomers ($M = 3.71$) or Gen Yers ($M = 3.52$) in their levels of supervisory support. However, Baby Boomers perceived significantly higher levels of supervisory support than Gen Yers.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations, Supervisory Support (N = 844)

Supervisory Support Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. My manager helps me get the resources that I need to meet my goals.	3.89	1.13	--						
2. My manager solicits my input when making decisions that affect me.	3.45	1.33	.63**	--					
3. My manager recognizes me when I do good work.	3.64	1.28	.62**	.65**	--				
4. My manager knows how I personally like to be recognized.	3.14	1.26	.55**	.59**	.62**	--			
5. My manager is aware of my career goals.	3.41	1.27	.44**	.52**	.48**	.52**	--		
6. My manager gives me the right amount of autonomy to do my work successfully.	3.96	1.17	.57**	.56**	.50**	.49**	.42**		
7. My manager provides me with feedback to help me improve my performance.	3.78	1.22	.63**	.62**	.68**	.62**	.48**	.51**	--

** $p < .001$

Table 3

Mean Scores for Supervisory Support as Measured by Generation (N = 930)

Generations	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Baby Boomers	308	3.71	.91
Generation X	337	3.59	.99
Generation Y	285	3.52	.98

One-Way Analysis of Variance of Perceived Supervisory Support by Generation (N = 930)

Source	SS	df	MS	F
Generation	5.42	2	2.71	2.85
Error	883.46	927	.95	

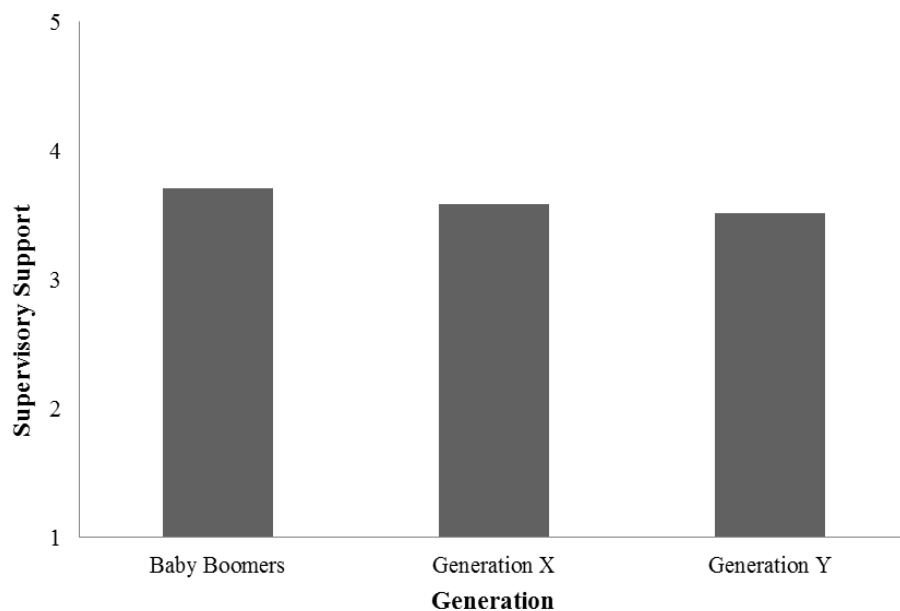


Figure. 1. Comparison of the three generations' mean ratings for perceived supervisory support (N = 930).

Differences in Generations Based on Gender and Ethnicity

Exploratory analyses were conducted to examine whether one's gender and ethnicity contribute to differences in PSS among the three generations, thereby suggesting a possible moderating effect of gender and/or ethnicity. Two two-way ANOVAs were conducted using the three generations (Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y) along with gender (male and female) and ethnicity (White, Black or African American, and Hispanic or Latino).

Table 4 presents the results of one analysis. The Generation x Gender interaction was not significant, $F(2, 924) = .96, p = .38$, suggesting that any generation-related differences did not vary as a function of gender. Figure 2 further dissects this analysis by displaying that male Baby Boomers ($M = 3.67$), Gen Xers ($M = 3.73$) and Gen Yers ($M = 3.67$) differ very little in perceived supervisory support. On the other hand, female Baby Boomers ($M = 3.72$), Gen Xers ($M = 3.54$) and Gen Yers ($M = 3.49$) differed slightly, suggesting that female Baby Boomers perceived the highest amount of supervisory support, and Gen Y perceived the lowest amount of supervisory support, but the differences were not statistically significant.

Table 5 shows that the result pertaining to Generation x Ethnicity interaction effect approached significance, $F(4, 862) = 1.99, p = .09$, suggesting that the pattern of differences in perceived supervisor support among the three generations is somewhat different for the three major ethnicities. According to Figure 3, for White employees, the perception of supervisory support amongst Baby Boomers ($M = 3.72$) and Gen X ($M =$

3.70) were similar to each other, with Gen Y employees somewhat less ($M = 3.28$). Black or African Americans showed a similar trend in that Baby Boomers ($M = 3.68$), Gen Xers ($M = 3.56$), and Gen Yers ($M = 3.33$). Hispanic or Latinos, on the other hand, follow the opposite trend in that Gen Yers ($M = 3.64$) had the highest levels of supervisory support, followed by Gen Xers ($M = 3.33$) and Baby Boomers ($M = 3.28$). A comprehensive look at the three generations within this analysis indicates that for White and Black or African American employees, Gen Yers perceived somewhat lower levels of supervisory support than Baby Boomers and Gen Xers, whereas, for Hispanic or Latino employees, Gen Yers perceived somewhat higher levels of supervisory support compared to the other two generations.

Table 4

Mean Scores for Supervisory Support as Measured by Generation (N = 930)

Gender	Generations	n	<i>M</i>	SD
Female	Baby Boomers	216	3.72	.92
	Generation X	244	3.54	.99
	Generation Y	217	3.49	1.06
Male	Baby Boomers	92	3.67	.87
	Generation X	93	3.73	.96
	Generation Y	68	3.67	.96

Two-Way Analysis of Variance of Supervisory Support by Generation by Gender (N = 930)

Source	SS	df	MS	F	η_p^2
Generation	2.69	2	1.34	1.41	.003
Gender	1.14	1	1.14	1.19	.001
Generation x Gender	1.84	2	.92	.96	.002
Error	880.47	924	.95		

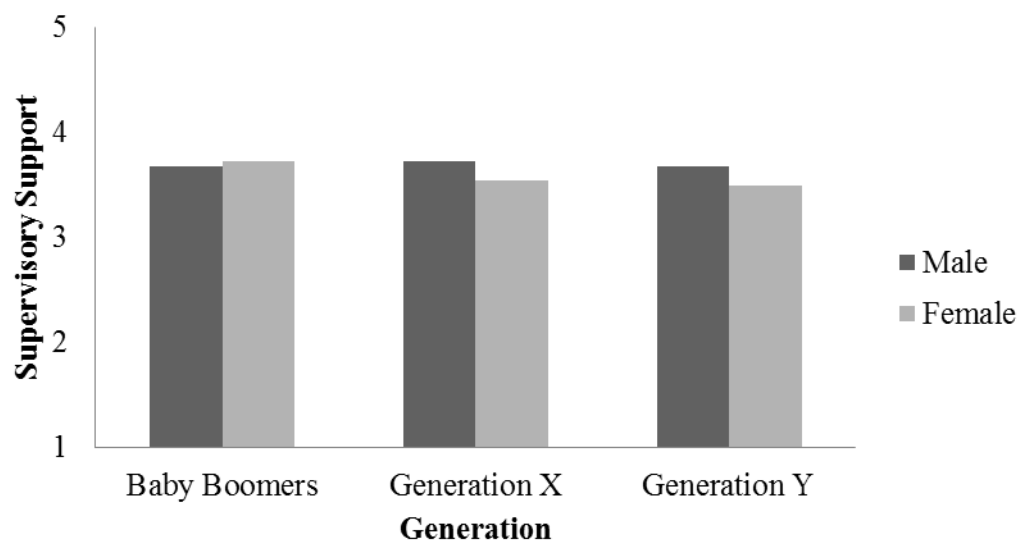


Figure. 2. Comparison of the three generations' mean ratings for perceived supervisory support by gender (N = 930).

Table 5

Mean Scores for Supervisory Support as Measured by Ethnicity and Generation (N = 871)

Ethnicity	Generation	n	<i>M</i>	SD
White	Baby Boomers	216	3.72	.88
	Generation X	127	3.68	.92
	Generation Y	108	3.49	1.05
Black	Baby Boomers	62	3.70	.98
	Generation X	138	3.56	.97
	Generation Y	75	3.41	1.10
Hispanic	Baby Boomers	12	3.28	.86
	Generation X	46	3.33	1.18
	Generation Y	87	3.64	.97

Two-Way Analysis of Variance of Supervisory Support by Generation by Ethnicity (N = 871)

Source	SS	df	MS	F	η_p^2
Generation	.17	2	.09	.09	.002
Ethnicity	3.30	2	1.65	1.73	.004
Generation x Ethnicity	7.57	4	1.89	1.99	.009
Error	820.53	862	.95		

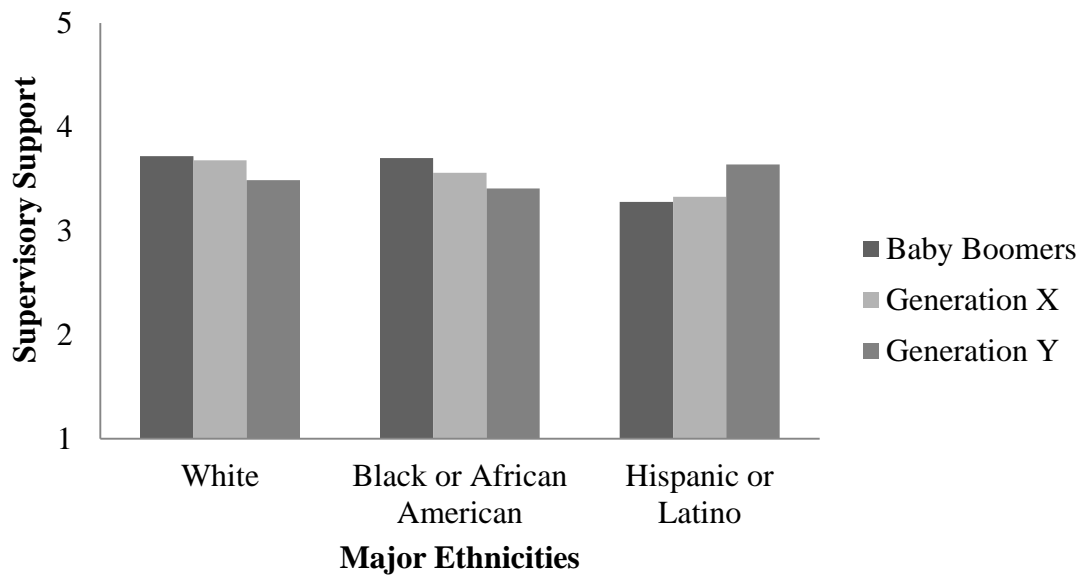


Figure. 3. Comparison of the three generations' mean ratings for perceived supervisory support by the three major ethnicities (N = 871).

To further these exploratory analyses, a three-way analysis of variance was conducted among the three generations (Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y), the three major ethnicities (White, Black or African American, and Hispanic or Latino), and the two genders (male and female). The results of this analysis (Table 6) reflects that the Generation x Gender x Ethnicity interaction effect was not significant, $F(4, 861) = 1.67$, $p = .16$, suggesting that a person's ethnicity and gender do not contribute to generational differences in supervisory support. To further examine this relationship, means for the three-way interaction effect are shown in Table 7. To allow for easy interpretation, the results were separated by gender. For the male employees, the means revealed that Whites varied very little among the three generations Baby Boomers ($M = 3.80$), Gen Xers ($M = 3.87$), and Gen Yers ($M = 3.74$). Blacks or African Americans followed a

similar pattern in that there was very little variance among Baby Boomers ($M = 3.39$), Gen Xers ($M = 3.46$), Gen Yers ($M = 3.24$)). However, Hispanics or Latino, followed a unique pattern, with Baby Boomers ($M = 2.89$) perceiving lower levels of supervisory support than Gen Xers ($M = 3.88$) and Gen Yers ($M = 3.59$).

Table 6

Three-Way Analysis of Variance of Supervisory Support by Generation by Gender by Ethnicity (N = 870)

Source	SS	df	MS	F	η_p^2
Generation	2.28	2	1.14	1.20	.002
Gender	2.09	1	2.09	2.19	.003
Ethnicity	1.58	2	.79	.83	.002
Generation x Gender	1.84	2	.92	.96	.002
Generation x Ethnicity	7.57	4	1.89	1.99	.009
Gender x Ethnicity	5.89	2	2.94	3.09	.007
Generation x Gender x Ethnicity	6.37	4	1.59	1.67	.008
Error	820.60	852	.95		

Table 7

Mean Scores for Supervisory Support as Measured by Ethnicity and Generation by Gender

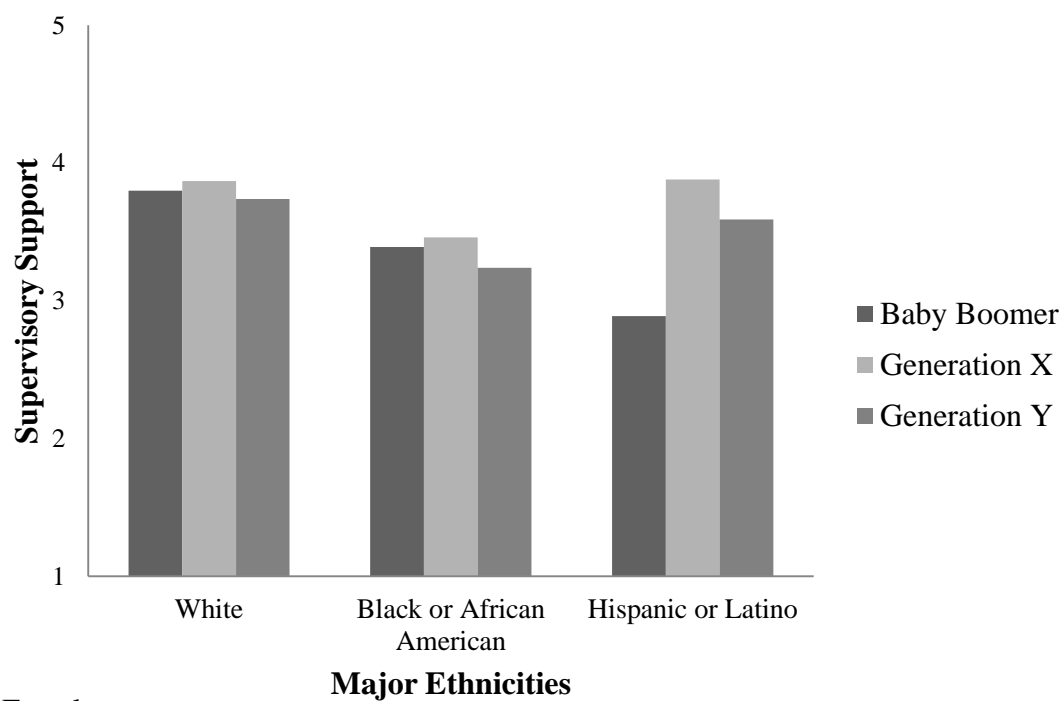
Male (n = 236)

Ethnicity	Generations	n	<i>M</i>	SD
White	Baby Boomers	66	3.80	.76
	Generation X	40	3.87	.88
	Generation Y	35	3.74	.93
Black	Baby Boomers	17	3.39	1.14
	Generation X	34	3.46	1.02
	Generation Y	13	3.24	1.25
Hispanic	Baby Boomers	4	2.89	.51
	Generation X	11	3.88	1.10
	Generation Y	16	3.59	.77

Female (n = 635)

Ethnicity	Generations	n	<i>M</i>	SD
White	Baby Boomers	150	3.68	.94
	Generation X	87	3.60	.92
	Generation Y	73	3.37	1.09
Black	Baby Boomers	45	3.82	.90
	Generation X	104	3.59	.95
	Generation Y	62	3.44	1.08
Hispanic	Baby Boomers	8	3.46	.97
	Generation X	35	3.16	1.17
	Generation Y	71	3.65	1.01

Males



Females

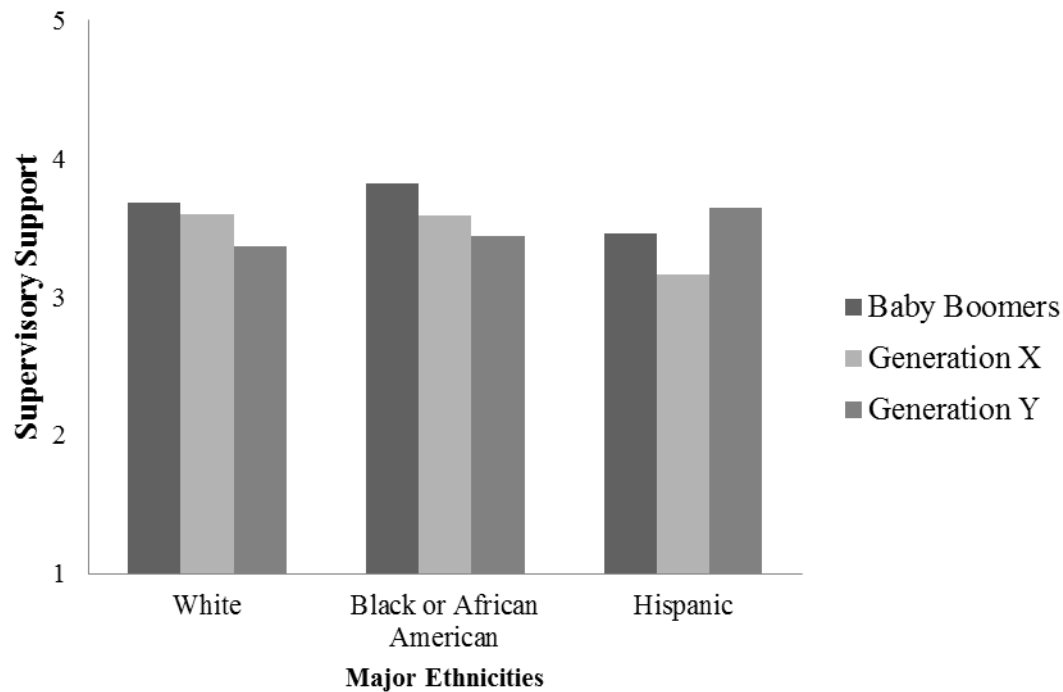


Figure. 5. Comparison of the three generations' mean rating for supervisory support by the three major ethnicities by gender in this sample ($N = 871$).

For females, the pattern of differences in means for White employees (Baby Boomers ($M = 3.68$), Gen Xers ($M = 3.60$) and Gen Yers ($M = 3.37$)) and Black or African American employees (Baby Boomers ($M = 3.82$), Gen Xers ($M = 3.59$), and Gen Yers ($M = 3.44$)) were somewhat similar as for male employees. However, female Hispanic or Latinos followed a different pattern than their male counterparts. Gen Xers ($M = 3.16$) perceived less supervisory support than Baby Boomers ($M = 3.46$) and Gen Yers ($M = 3.65$).

In the preliminary analysis, the effect of generation on perceived supervisory support approached significance which then led to the examination of further exploratory analyses. Post-hoc analyses suggested that Baby Boomers perceived significantly higher levels of supervisory support than Gen Yers. This trend continued with female Baby Boomers in that they perceived higher levels of supervisory support than female Gen Yers. Even in terms of the three major ethnicities in this sample, White and Black Baby Boomers had significantly higher levels of supervisor support than Gen Yers. Lastly, the three-way ANOVA further validated this trend by showing that in the interaction effect of gender, ethnicity and generation, Baby Boomers perceived higher levels of supervisory support than Gen Yers.

Discussion

In the current workforce, it has become increasingly vital to evaluate whether the three active generations (Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Gen Yers) are receiving the right amount and kind of support from their supervisors to do their job well and to add value to their organization. Human resources practitioners are currently deploying talent development programs based merely on simple stereotypes and anecdotes associated with each generation in popular media. Past research has highlighted the type of management traits each of these generations prefers, but has not examined if they are receiving adequate support from their supervisors. Hence, the purpose of the current study was to measure the levels of perceived supervisory support for each generation, and to assess whether individuals differ in their perceptions of treatment from their supervisor according to their generational membership.

Summary of Results

The primary research question for this study was whether there would be generational differences in perceived supervisory support. Initial results suggested that there were no significant differences among the three generations. However, further ad-hoc analyses suggested that Gen Xers were similar to both Baby Boomers and Gen Yers in their level of perceived supervisory support, but that Baby Boomers perceived somewhat higher levels of supervisory support than Gen Yers. This suggests that Baby Boomers felt slightly more valued for their contributions from their supervisors than Gen Yers.

Results of the exploratory analysis assessing whether any generational differences in supervisory support varied as a function of gender showed that the pattern of differences among the three generations was not significantly different for females and males. However, in further investigating means in the female group, Baby Boomers perceived the highest amount of supervisory support in comparison to the other generations. Additionally, Gen Yers perceived the lowest amount of supervisory support.

In analyzing the impact of generations and ethnicity on perceived supervisory support, the three generations did not differ as a function of ethnicity (White, Black or African American, and Hispanic or Latino). Though the initial analysis was not statistically significant, further exploratory investigation suggested that, among White and Black or African Americans, Baby Boomers and Gen Xers were similar in nature, and Gen Yers were somewhat lower. On the other hand, among the Hispanics or Latinos, Gen Yers had the highest levels of supervisory support and Baby Boomers had the lowest. However, the findings regarding Hispanic or Latino group should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size.

Finally, an additional exploratory analysis investigating a three-way interaction among generation, gender, and ethnicity was performed which was also not significant. In looking at these findings, on the surface, it might seem like the three generations do not differ in their levels of perceived supervisory support, but further exploration develops a distinctive pattern – Baby Boomers and Gen Xers had similar levels of supervisory support and Gen Yers perceived lower levels across genders and ethnicities,

except Hispanic or Latinos. The question then becomes, why do Baby Boomers consistently perceive higher levels of supervisory support than Gen Yers?

Theoretical Implications

The results of the current study do in part align with past research in that some differences among the three generations exist (Cogin, 2012; Francis-Smith, 2004; Kowske, Rasch & Wiley, 2010; Zemke et al, 2000). There has been some disagreement in the literature and the popular press regarding whether the three generations differ in workplace behaviors, values, attitudes, and management practices. For instance, Meredith et al. (2002) suggested that an individualist approach should be used for Baby Boomers, an exciting workplace should be provided for Gen Xers, and a more team-focused environment for Gen Yers. On the other hand, Becton et al. (2014) found no differences in the three generations in regards to job mobility behaviors and compliance-related behaviors. With many researchers having focused on the four major research areas (behaviors, values, attitudes, and management practices), little, to no, research has been conducted in regards to differences in perceived supervisory support among the three generations. The current study showed that although there were no statistically significant differences among the three generations, there was ultimately some variance in the way they perceived supervisory support in that Baby Boomers were somewhat more likely to perceive higher levels of supervisory support than Gen Yers.

The results of the current study conflict with those of past research regarding similarities between Baby Boomers and Gen Yers. Popular media have even suggested a

new term for Gen Yers – Echo Boomers. The reason for this congruence with the Baby Boomer generation maybe due to the similarities in exposure to wars, scandals, and importance of centralized family (Sujansky, 2004). To this extent, the current study is unique in that Baby Boomers were found to perceive somewhat higher levels of supervisor support than Gen Yers.

To address the question why Baby Boomers seem to consistently perceive higher levels of supervisory support than Gen Yers, it is important to understand the dynamics of management positions at large organizations. Due to the natural upward progression for employees using career ladders, most Baby Boomers are now in upper level management or executive positions, Gen Xers are people managers, and Gen Yers are individual contributors. People managers are individuals who lead small groups within an organization, whereas individual contributors are those who do not have a team reporting to them. Corporate America further validates Baby Boomers perceiving higher levels of supervisory support than Gen Yers as they are placed higher in the management chain at most organizations. In order to successfully increase supervisory support levels in Gen Yers, it is important for Gen Xers to rise to this new leadership responsibility and understand the nature of this new cohort. To further explain the management and development of Gen Y, de Villiers (2015) suggests that Gen X should make peace with the unique requirements and needs of this new generation. With more Gen Yers being managed by Gen Xers, it is important for practitioners to highlight effective talent development methods to further cultivate this manager and employee relationship.

Practical Implications

The results of the current study indicate that there are some differences in the perceptions of the three major generations regarding perceived supervisory support. In order to increase supervisory support for Gen Y employees, Gen X managers may want to focus on strategies that emphasize autonomy and creativity to increase engagement and levels of supervisory support among their employees. For example, Asghar (2014) suggests that managers need to understand the benefit of transferring from a controlling management style to a more inclusive team philosophy. However, changing the way managers think is not easy. Thus, training and developmental opportunities for managers are suggested in order to obtain the ideal supervisory support levels for Gen Yers. These training opportunities can include educating them on the dynamics of the new workforce, learning to explain the purpose behind a task or project so that the individual contributor can understand his or her place, practicing emotional intelligence to help better understand Gen Yers, and connecting an individual task to the company's overall mission and vision. Emotional intelligence refers to one's ability to handle interpersonal relationships empathetically.

Talent management as a discipline is still relatively new with many gaps to fill. As more talent development and management processes need to be signed off by Gen X managers, Gen Xers need to take ownership of becoming a successful people manager. To ensure that past talent management resources that assisted Baby Boomers in becoming effective managers are not sacrificed, it may be helpful to audit dated processes and

modify them so they can be applied in today's workforce. These resources can educate managers on the unique challenges and opportunities of the present workforce. This can include the Gen Yers' need for autonomy, innovation, and support from their manager. Lastly, managers should consider communicating their needs more clearly, but at the same time understanding that millennials appreciate regular feedback and coaching throughout the process.

The current study provides insight into the different levels of perceived supervisory support among the three generations. Though the results provided interesting insight into managing the three generations, decisions about how to best support an employee should not be based solely on their generational cohort. Managers should take insight from this study to participate in appropriate training and developmental opportunities, but still support each employee as an individual contributor rather than a member of a generational group.

In order for organizations to effectively apply the results of this study, focus groups for educating managers on the dynamics of different generational groups should be conducted. The content of these trainings can be developed through interviewing key stakeholders belonging to the three generational cohorts. Once these trainings are completed, follow-up research with a focus group should be implemented to determine whether educating people managers on team dynamics has changed the perception levels of supervisory support among the three generations.

Contributions of the Current Study

There are two primary strengths of the current study. The first strength is the comprehensive survey to measure perceived supervisory support. The goal of this study was to utilize items that reflected supervisory support in which managers displayed behaviors providing support and encouraging creativity in the workplace. Though there is an existing measure (Survey of Perceived Organizational Support by Eisenberger et al. (1986)) to collect data on levels of perceived supervisory support, it measures variables that do not cover all of the people dynamics in today's workplaces. The survey specifically used for this study holistically measures supervisory support by encompassing ideas such as personal recognition and autonomy. Additionally, the items used in this survey measured whether supervisors explained the availability of resources to effectively perform in one's role and providing meaningful feedback. The survey developed for the current study should provide a solid framework for the measurement of supervisory support for future research on this topic.

The second strength of the current study involves its contribution to existing literature. Though generational differences have been explored for behaviors, values, attitudes, and management practices, the construct of supervisory support have not been explored. This study introduces a new research topic by exploring generational differences in perceived supervisory support – an avenue that was left unpaved until now. Besides looking at just generational differences, this study also added to the literature by exploring the role of gender and ethnicity in generational differences. The current study

has broadened the scope of research on the topic of generational differences in supervisory support.

Limitations and Future Research

There are three potential limitations of the current study. First, the study was conducted at a single organization in the medical industry, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other industries. The nature of the work may have also influenced ratings of supervisory support. For employees at this company, field sites are quite common resulting in a physical distance between an employee and their respective supervisor. Additionally, many have the option for flexible work schedules, which may be outside of traditional work hours further developing a gap between the employee and the manager to connect for a one-on-one. In this company, the inevitable distance between a manager and his or her employee might have resulted in employees experiencing lower levels of perceived supervisory support than a company that is more traditional in nature. For instance, items such as “my manager provides me with feedback to help me improve my performance” may not be applicable due to the irregular business hours and lack of interaction between the employee and their manager. Further research is suggested to replicate the current study at multiple other organizations across industries in order to assess the generalizability of the results.

The second limitation of this study is the unequal distribution of gender and ethnicity within the sample. The average percentage of females within the three generations was 73%. The results of the current study showed that the three generations

did not differ significantly on supervisory support among males. Additionally, Whites represented about 48% of the sample, where Hispanic or Latino's represented 15.7%. According to the results of the current study, White Baby Boomers perceived the highest levels of supervisor support and Gen Yers perceived the lowest levels of supervisory support; however, Hispanic Baby Boomers perceived the lowest levels and Gen Yers perceived the highest levels. A more even distribution of ethnicity will help clarify this discrepancy in ethnicity and its relationship with supervisory support.

Lastly, the response format for the collection of generation data could have been more stringent. In the current study, generational membership was determined by the age group in which the participant most identified with – 18-29 (Gen Y), 30-44 (Gen X) and 45+ (Baby Boomer). A participant's birth year should have been collected in order to insure correct classification into a generational cohort. Future research is recommended to consider these gaps before replicating this model.

Conclusion

Gen Y will soon represent the majority of the American workforce. Keeping this in mind, it is increasingly important to identify the wants and needs of the active generations in the workforce to continue producing meaningful work to positively impact organizations. Gen Yers have shown to differ from employees of other generations in behaviors, values, attitudes, and management practices. However, prior research has not highlighted whether the three major generations feel valued for their contributions from their supervisors. Much of the existing information on this topic has been found in

popular press or lectures based on stereotypes. This study provides evidence that managers should be mindful of the way they support their employees depending on their generational membership. Additional research is encouraged to validate the findings of the current study and to further examine generational differences in the way employees feel valued and appreciated for their work from their managers.

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